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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 001779

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TAGS: PGOV PREL MY  
SUBJECT: MAHATHIR DEFEATED AS PARTY DELEGATE, STILL INVITED  
TO UMNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 1639

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for  
reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: UMNO party machinery working for Prime Minister Abdullah defeated former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's efforts to become a delegate to the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) General Assembly to be held in Kuala Lumpur November 14-17. Mahathir's son, Mukhriz, came in fifth place in voting in the Kubang Paso district of Kedah state and ensured himself a delegate's seat at the convention. Division leaders persuaded voters to reject Mahathir in the interest of party unity after having distributed a "preferred list" of candidates. Mahathir accused the party of money politics and vote buying to prevent his election. UMNO Secretary General confirmed that Mahathir would still be invited to attend the General Assembly, as all past party presidents and Prime Ministers have traditionally been invited as special guests. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad met a coordinated opposition in UMNO's Kubang Paso division elections and failed to achieve his goal of becoming one of seven delegates to the UMNO General Assembly. UMNO's Kubang Paso division in Mahathir's home state of Kedah met on September 9 to choose their delegates for the November general assembly. The results were announced on September 9 and Mahathir had only managed to garner 227 votes from the 493 divisional voters, placing him ninth among the 17 contestants. However, Mahathir's son, Mukhriz, won 289 votes and placed fifth in the election, guaranteeing him a seat as a delegate at the general meeting.

¶3. (U) Local delegates reported that Mahathir was considered a favorite and was expected to receive an overwhelming majority of the votes until party leaders hosted a meeting for 300 division delegates the night before the election. Kubang Paso Division Chief and Deputy Minister for Internal Security Mohd Johari Bahrum, along with former Kedah Chief Minister Osman Aroff and former Mahathir political secretary Saad Man invited 300 division delegates to a meeting at a golf club in Jitra, Kedah on September 8. During the meeting, Osman reportedly recalled Mahathir's penchant for creating divisions in the party and called on the delegates to show loyalty to UMNO by rejecting Mahathir's candidacy: "Do we want UMNO to be divided again? If you don't want that to happen, then I call upon all of you not to vote for Mahathir." The division secretary, Samsuddin Ahmad, later admitted that the division leadership held the meeting and handed out slips of paper with a list of preferred candidates which excluded Mahathir and his son Mukhriz. Of the seven candidates on the "preferred list" only one was not elected-and that position went to Mukhriz. Samsuddin later commented to the press, "The preferred candidates list was distributed to delegates on Friday night. We didn't see it

as something wrong as it is a normal practice in all UMNO contests, including supreme council election."

14. (U) In an interview with the press following his loss, Mahathir held up one of the "preferred lists" and claimed it was found in an envelope with RM 200 and that Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's cronies had it used as a bribe to convince delegates not to support his candidacy. Abdullah publicly lamented such accusations and stated that Mahathir's allegations should be taken seriously and that Mahathir should file a police report if he had sufficient evidence that vote buying had taken place. Division chief Johari denied all allegations of "money politics" and claimed that it was an insult to divisional delegates to imply that their votes could be bought for a mere RM 200. The division secretary, Samsuddin, promised: "We'll investigate it . . .

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but what usually happens is that the losers will create all sorts of stories."

15. (C) The UMNO Secretary General Radzi Sheikh Ahmad confirmed a few days later that Mahathir would still be invited to attend the General Assembly, as all past party presidents and Prime Ministers have traditionally been invited as special guests; however, the formal invitation, which Radzi promised to write personally, would not be sent until after Hari Raya (Eid al Fitr, October 24-25). As a special guest, Mahathir will not be permitted to address the assembly and rumors that Mahathir would try to move for a vote of no confidence in Abdullah are not credible as the UMNO supreme council controls all items on the agenda and ultimately control all issues raised during the assembly. Nevertheless, one political insider in the Ministry of Internal Security told us that there is speculation that Mahathir purposefully may arrive late to the general

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assembly. Mahathir is thought to be planning his entrance during Abdullah's speech in hopes of drawing a standing ovation for his attendance, such as he received during the 2004 UMNO convention, purportedly to embarrass Abdullah and "to remind the UMNO supreme council that he still has support among the UMNO delegates."

16. (C) Comment: There is no question that UMNO leadership circled the wagons in Kubang Paso. Senior party officials from around the country visited Kedah in the days leading up to the Kubang Paso election and all eyes were on this divisional race. Mahathir himself pointed out that the party treated this more like a presidential election than a divisional election of delegates. And in the end, it was a presidential election of sorts. It was Abdullah's most direct challenge to date within UMNO, not for the position of party president or prime minister, but in the political arena of popular support and party politics. Abdullah proved his strength and influence over the party machinery and reinforced the power of incumbency. Mahathir himself emplaced controls over UMNO assemblies that leaves the Supreme Council as the ultimate powerbroker in determining what issues are raised before the body of delegates. Regardless of Mahathir's attendance in November, his challenges would not reach the convention floor. Mahathir has found himself the victim of the system that he created.

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